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Satanic Ritual Abuse and Legend Ostension

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Folklorists have proposed the term *ostension* to describe real-life actions that are guided by a pre-existing legend. In its purest form, ostension is the literal acting out of a story in real life. An example might be if a group of child abusers, hearing rumors about Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA), were to change their modus operandi to include some of the atrocities mentioned, to confuse children and make prosecution difficult. Such a situation is possible, but folklore research suggests that it is far rarer in reality than three other forms of ostension: *pseudo-ostension, quasi-ostension,* and *proto-ostension.* In pseudo-ostension, individuals fabricate details of SRA to lead others to believe that satanists are responsible, when the child abuse has a different nature and motivation. In quasi-ostension, over-anxious authorities may overinterpret evidence to make it coordinate with notions of "classic" SRA, when in fact the situation is less clear-cut. Finally, in proto-ostension, individuals may, for a variety of sincere reasons, claim events of other people as their own personal experiences. Analysts of the SRA controversy should be careful not to commit themselves to extreme positions of belief or disbelief; facts can become narrative and narrative can become fact.

Discussion of claims about satanic cults in the Western world has often tended to become polarized into black and white terms: Does satanic ritual abuse (SRA) exist or not? The term *urban legend* has lately been introduced into many popular discussions to dismiss SRA claims as obviously irrational and untrue. This abuse of the term recalls the way that the word *myth*, for most professionals a sacred narrative, has come to mean "lie" in the eyes of the general public.

The same is true with the term *legend*, which trained folklorists understand not as "a ridiculous tale," but as "a story (story element, fragment, or reference) that concerns socially important themes not completely clarified and thus provoking controversial dialectically opposed standpoints" (Dégh & Vázsonyi, 1983, p. 31). We recognize that when lore about social dangers such as cults circulates widely, it tends, paradoxically, to help bring these dangers into a reality of their own. Legends have a way of coming true. That is, whether or not satanists have been operating undercover for centuries, the current controversy has created real "satanic" activities, through the process of *ostension*.

Semiotician Umberto Eco first used this term to refer to moments in oral communication when, instead of using words, people substitute actions. "Would you like a cigarette?" might be signaled by waving a pack. "Stop talking" might be indicated by a finger drawn across one's throat, symbolizing a cut throat. Hungarian-born folklorists Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi appropriated the term to refer to ways in which "the reality itself, the thing, the situation or event itself functions in the role of message" (1983, p. 6). Entire legend plots can, for instance, be reduced to an allusive action. Freshmen living in dormitories often pass around a common legend in which a girl is attacked by a mysterious "hatchet man" and dies scratching at her roommate's door. Sylvia Grider (1980), one of Dégh's students, found that for weeks after the story circulated, girls would frighten each other by scratching, rather than knocking, at each others' doors.

Grider (1984, 1985) found the most unsettling complex of ostensive allusions attached to a series of panics caused by rumors that sadists were trying

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to harm children by placing razor blades or other dangerous substances in Halloween candy. Although no actual instances of anonymous sadists were ever documented (Best & Horiuchi, 1985), parents and authority figures began altering their behavior according to the legend, cutting fruit or taking candy bags to x-ray rooms to look for razor blades. More unsettlingly, children took to planting objects in their own treats to cause a stir in their community. Furthermore, on the Halloween of 1974, Ronald Clark O'Bryan of Houston killed his own son for insurance money by planting cyanide-laced candy in his trick-or-treat bag. Although O'Bryan tried to use the legend as a smokescreen, evidence linked him both to the candy and the poison, and he was convicted of the murder and executed in 1984.

Such complexes of legend and actions led Dégh and Vázsonyi (1983) to suggest that, even when no actual conspiracy of sadists exists, the ubiquity of information about such sadists itself tends to influence irrational individuals to commit criminal acts. Such a legend tradition, they concluded, constitutes an unorganized, nameless conspiracy unified by "a similar ideology and moral excuse for child murder and the commission of what is called 'expressive crime'" (p. 15). Sociologist Joel Best (1991) criticized Dégh and Vázsonyi for overstressing the prevalence of copy-cat crimes; in fact, he noted, genuine cases of criminal ostension are extremely rare, although the media tends to give them exaggerated attention. However, the concept of ostension still helps explain a diversity of common events. Dégh and Vázsonyi proposed several degrees of ostension, describing ways in which circulating narratives can influence reality, or at least the way reality is interpreted.

Ostension proper involves the literal acting out of a legend. Although uncommon, some "satanic" murders have involved ostension of traditional plots. The 1989 abduction-murder of Mark Kilroy by a Matamoros drug gang, which was influenced by the American cult movie, *The Believers*, seems to be one clear example (Raschke, 1990; cf. Green, 1991). Although never solved, the 1981 mutilation/murder of a young couple near Logan, Ohio seemed to be clearly influenced by widespread animal mutilation rumors in the area (Ellis, 1989).

Such instances, as Best (1991) underscored, are rare; more often what we see is some form of action that suggests the legend but does not fully enact it. *Pseudo-ostension* involves a hoax in which the participant produces evidence that the legend has been enacted: Teens often fabricate evidence of cult sacrifices, even to the extent to killing animals and leaving occult symbols behind at the site. Often this involves a kind of initiation rite called a "legend-trip," in which experienced teens will take friends out to a remote site specially decorated with spooky paraphernalia to test their bravery. Many of these trips will involve mock rituals or hoaxes in which confederates imitate witches or supernatural figures (Ellis, 1983, 1991).

Quasi-ostension involves a misinterpretation of naturally occurring events in terms of an existing legend. In the notorious "Toledo Dig" of 1986, law enforcement agents claimed random items of trash found in a drifter's cabin as evidence that human sacrifices had been conducted nearby (Ellis, 1991). Furthermore, in my area of Pennsylvania, teens have admitted being amused when they held open beer parties in areas alleged to be "devil-worship" sites and found police reluctant to approach them. In such cases, adolescents may encourage the legend to allow them to drink illegally without being molested.

Proto-ostension occurs when, to gain attention, persons take a story alleged to have happened to someone else and claim it as a personal experience of their own. Jeffrey Victor (1989, 1990) found during a cult panic in Jamestown, New York, that people swore to having seen mutilated dogs hanging from light poles; police found none. Lauren Stratford gained the sympathy of several different California Pentecostal groups with a string of contradictory abuse stories: these now seem to have been ostensive legends of this type (Passantino, Passantino, & Trott, 1989).

Obviously, when a panic strikes a community, many different forms of ostension may arise simultaneously, all tending to reinforce each other and maintain the sensation. The well-documented community panics in Missoula, Montana (Balch & Gilliam, 1991) involved a wide range of allegedly "satanic" activities, from graveyard mischief to threatening letters. In retrospect, these proved to be ostensive behavior, ranging from misinterpretation of evidence, planting of false evidence, and passing on legend as alleged experience. Furthermore, the culprits were not only adolescents dabbling in the occult; the Lansford death threats, police later discovered, were written by a parent who had grudges

against administrators and used the cult stories as an opportunity for revenge (Hazleton *Standard-Speaker* [25 November 1991]).

Those involved, pro and con, in the present satanic ritual abuse controversy might be well advised to keep ostension in mind when interpreting evidence. It is certainly true, as Kenneth Lanning (1989) of the FBI has warned, that a group of child abusers might well incorporate elements from much-discussed SRA cases into their acts to confuse children and make prosecution difficult. Even if satanism is not a long-lived underground way of life, the present publicity might well bring it into being.

On the other hand, folklore and sociological research suggests that literal ostension is far rarer in reality than the other forms. Pseudo-ostension (hoaxing) may encourage parents who themselves abuse or even murder their own children to fabricate "satanic" evidence to direct police attention elsewhere. In a similar way, Tanya Dacri of Philadelphia reported in January 1989 that her 2-month-old infant had been snatched from her arms at a shopping center by two weirdos. Later investigation showed that the baby had in fact been killed and dismembered by the mother, who had a record of mental problems and child abuse; the child abduction story was an attempt at a smokescreen (FOAF-tale News [FN] [13 March 1989]:4).

Quasi-ostension may lead over-anxious authorities to overinterpret evidence to make it fit notions of "classic" SRA, when in fact the situation is less clear-cut. In the recent San Diego scandal, social workers used a boy's scar from a documented operation, talk about "devils and angels, people going to heaven, and fear about his grandmother dying," and a range of poorly documented "cult signals" to remove three children from their grandparents, their legal guardians. One medical expert claimed to have seen evidence of sexual abuse when he examined the youngest girl's genitals; later a respected child-abuse expert examined photographs and said, "I would use this picture to teach what normals look like." The children were released with official apologies (*FN* [25 March 1992]:7).

Finally, proto-ostension may well encourage persons sincerely trying to reconstruct a troubled youth to remember details from other "survivors'" stories as having happened to them as well. Anthropologist Sherrill Mulhern (1991) warned that the personality type most often claiming SRA is also notable for being fantasy prone and easily hypnotized, two conditions that may well lead to sincere but false memories. Christian psychiatrist Basil Jackson (1976) warned against naiveté in dealing with cases of demonic possession, a phenomenon closely related in being characterized by apparent alternation of personalities. The fact that clients are "cured" of mental problems after sincerely undergoing exorcism, he argued, "does not prove that demons were involved or that the devil had anything whatsoever to do with the particular client or his condition." Indeed, he concluded, "the more ignorant we are of precise etiologic factors, the more esoteric are our interpretations and explanations likely to be" (p. 260). The same could be said about the alleged role of satanists in causing MPD and the increasingly baroque ways in which they elude detection.

In conclusion, investigators of the contemporary satanic scene should assess the ways in which the information they publicize affects the phenomena that they claim to document. In some cases, events provoke stories; but in the case of cultlore it is far more likely that stories provoke events. Some forms of ostension are relatively benign; others can be deadly. As far back as 1978, evangelist Kurt E. Koch (1978) averred that devil-worshipping babysitters in the United States had actually roasted a baby in an oven, a claim recently circulated during the Rochdale, England SRA panic. Such an event has not been documented as having been committed by satanists; however, on at least two occasions young children *have* been killed by being placed in ovens as part of an improvised religious ceremony. In both cases, the rites were Christian exorcisms intended to banish the devil (Watkins, 1983; *Portland* [Maine] *Press Herald* [20 November 1985]). In both cases the parent proved mentally unstable; yet anti-satanist crusaders might well consider to what extent their dramatization of gruesome but undocumented abuse details may well be contributing to the genuine child abuse problems in the United States. We have to accept, as Dégh and Vázsonyi stressed, "that fact can become narrative and narrative can become fact" (1983, p. 29).

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